

## **MIRROR OF THE SOUL**

### **DREAMS OF GLASS**

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*"If you are a blower of glass, fashion the cup as if  
it were to be touched by the lips of your beloved."*

from The Hindi.

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When looking back over the last thirty years, I ask myself how did I become a glassmaker and why did I choose to master the fabulous art of glass blowing? To answer that question, the following pages will take you on a retrospective journey through my past and I propose to share with you some of the more eventful anecdotes which seem relevant to the shaping of my artistic development. In such a way, I wish to unveil to the reader parts of a jigsaw puzzle which may give you a better insight to my personality, that is, why I am who I am and how did I choose to become a glassblower.

I was born in Paris, France in 1958 - the year Fidel Castro took over Cuba - the only child of my French father and Venezuelan mother. Their union was to be brief since my parents divorced when I was three years old and as a result of their separation, I was to be brought up by my mother and mostly in the company of women, which gave me a different sensitivity and perspective into the patriarchal world in which we live, making me feel as though I was not really a part of it and that the rules of male domination did not apply to me.



That feeling of being an observer rather than a participant was also accentuated by my being a cultural misfit, that is not being completely French nor Venezuelan, but rather somewhere in between, in a kind of no-man's land where national boundaries seemed superficial.

When I reached the age of eight my family, that is, my mother and her second husband (she was to marry four times before finding her perfect companion), left Paris and moved to Spain where we settled in Barcelona, a most original city which introduced me to the marvellous extravaganza of Gaudi's architecture, the richness of Catalan culture and the whole of Spain, the land of such giants as Garcia Lorca, Picasso or Dali, the latter whom I was to meet in a most intimidating display of theatrical nonsense, to the delight of his entourage. We used to holiday in the small fishing village of Cadaques where Dali resided and befriended my mother whom he nicknamed and adopted as Staline and would not call her by any other name. And so I was once introduced to the grand maniac of Surrealist Art, and once only since he had a paranoiac distaste for children and animals alike.

later on philosophy and politics

Those days were the convention breaking times of the late sixties and early seventies and my mother's cosmopolitan and bohemian upbringing led me to meet a great diversity of interesting people associated with art, music, film making, poetry, literature, dance and fashion. Art in general was always given a place of importance in our home and I was encouraged to read (I devoured the entire Classical Mythologies) and developed a curiosity for a wide field of creative interests and a sensitivity to aesthetics and style, sophistication and refined elegance. Those early ears in Spain, besides the exotic flavour they stimulated in me, strengthened a feeling of latin-hood, and up to these days, I am one of those individuals who enjoys talking with his hands and affectionate physical contact, a distasteful habit it seems to most Anglo-Saxons!

We were to return to Paris where I began my secondary studies and entered an elitist but progressive catholic boarding school where the foundations of classical French culture were drummed into me and I increasingly developed an interest for history, poetry, literature and

later on philosophy and politics.

As a young boy of twelve, I was confronted with a question that would more and more be asked to me: what are you going to do when you grow up? And my earliest answer was the romantic vision of being a poet or by default a novelist or a playwright. So I wrote poetry which I published in the school newspaper to the delight of my teachers, successfully entered literary competitions and kept up with voluminous reading lists. But the most significant legacy of those years spent in such an elite orientated environment was to teach me an ability for public speech and develop a natural disposition for leadership, all required skills which the ruling class must jealously preserve and pass on from one generation to another in order to remain ruling. And so, my teenage years were split between two clashing realities; the conservative walls of boarding school and an unconventional family life where being "bourgeois" was to be avoided at all costs, a situation which confirmed my position as a misfit. This feeling of "being different" was to manifest itself in yet another curious way. Unlike other peers of my own age group, I would not experience the average teenage rebellion

syndrome where "parents are a drag" and leaving home becomes a priority target. On the opposite, home to me was a place where rejecting the establishment was a norm and excitement was always present. Having always preferred the company of adults, my mother and her friends proved to be far more interesting and better fun than the majority of my school mates.

Another significant influence in those early years was my maternal grandmother to whom I was always very close and who because of her own involvement in the art world encouraged me to pursue creative matters. Having left Venezuela at an early age for political reasons, she was to make Paris her home where as a patron of the arts she initiated a Foundation to help finance and promote Venezuelan artists to work or study in Paris. She would therefore be instrumental in organising exhibitions in both Paris and Caracas and consequently establishing a cultural bridge between the two countries. As such, her "hotel particulier" became a focal point in the Paris Latin-American artists community, a meeting place where hospitality was always available. In exchange for her financial support, those artist would give her works of

art and along the years she acquired a large collection of modern art, transforming her residence into a small museum, an over fascinating playground which I never tired to explore.

Amongst the more prominent artists she supported in the early stages of their career, individuals such as Soto or Cruz-Diez would reach international stature and recognition as exponents of the Op Art movement in the early sixties.

Being herself a creative person, she liked working with clay and accommodated part of her house as a ceramics studio which she also made available to other artists and their works which she chose to keep for her collection literally clustered every corner of her house. But her great love was photography and she would spend long hours printing in her darkroom or looking for an image or some detail that would catch her eye and for her to capture on film.

She also taught me the basics of black and white photography and when I proved familiar enough with that medium, she gave me one of her



old Rolleiflex. And it was through photography that I first became involved in the visual arts. With her help and encouragement, I was to put together at the age of fourteen my first solo exhibition which was held at the school. The work was a series of large black and white prints which could have been described as surrealist still-lives.

Travelling is and always was a major passion in my life and I was then determined to embrace photo-journalism, a career which I thought would combine an adventurous lifestyle, exotic travels and artistic worth. But life turned out to be quite different. When I turned eighteen and as as I obtained my baccalaureat degree and left school, my paternal grand-father died leaving me a substantial inheritance, a twist of fate which would become a poisoned gift.

On the doorstep of adult life, I was suddenly confronted with total freedom, a situation which throws most people off balance, and in time I was to be no exception. Having no obligation to work to make a living or study towards a career, I decided to postpone university studies, a reaction to the restrictions imposed on me by the framework of boarding

school. Because I had no inclination towards business matters, I would not take responsibility for the financial management of my inheritance, a decision which later on proved to be a mistake and instead chose to travel the world and discover more of the planet that surrounds us. Even though I was leading an interesting and privileged lifestyle, my existence was lacking direction and besides "having a good time" I would not commit myself to anything except my need for leisurely enjoyment, a somewhat shallow and superficial attitude. But I did remain creative and started producing a series of mixed media collage and photomontage works, a progression from my earlier photographic efforts. Unfortunately, my disposition was more that of a dilettante and I showed no discipline nor professional commitment, both indispensable qualities if one is to channel and develop natural talent.

The Americans are obsessed with Paris and the French with New York and when I reached the age of twenty-one and after dabbling for a while as assistant cameraman (I entertained the idea of working with film), I decided to leave Paris and moved to New York where I would reside for two years. I was in search of renewed stimulation and

excitement and New York confronted me daily with urban high-energy, a city which leaves one feeling as if you are part of the largest metropolis in the world, a status and reputation well deserved by the Big Apple. New York city is a fabulous experience.

I loved roaming the streets of New York, my head looking up towards the sky. I rented a comfortable loft on Washington street in downtown bohemian Tribeca, one block below Canal street, an area which then was just starting to be renovated. It provided artists with warehouses that could be accommodated for large working studio space if not affordable accommodation. However small and miserable hovel you may be living in, rent is never cheap on Manhattan.

One aspect of New York that makes it such a rich melting-pot of ideas and energy is its multi-cultural diversity, a cosmopolitan meeting place where all nations of the world are represented and cohabit together. I was particularly sensitive to the dominance of its black population as well as its large Latin-American community, a presence which filled the air with music and dance and transformed its streets in to a stage for performances of all kinds. Violence in New York is not a

myth but a cruel reality but I never felt threatened in any form, even in some of the more rundown areas where crime becomes a lifestyle and a survival necessity.

my numerous travels and my attraction to

multi-culturalism. It was then, that I discovered the Japanese artist  
Tadashi. I loved roaming the streets of New York, my head looking up towards the sky discovering its amazing skyscrapers, revelling with delight in a festival of Art Deco architecture at its most affluent. Its multitude of book shops, art galleries, curio shops and some of the best museums in the world provided me with endless stimulation. And New York had the most avant garde night life; the Big Apple indeed also was the Mecca of Hedonism.

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island in the world where they had made their home.

Because I used to mix with a variety of artists and creative people, peer pressure and their support encouraged me to carry on with my mixed-media collage work and for a while I attended a course on poster design at the New-School, a division of the Parsons School of Design.

their  
future and the promise of a better lifestyle.

For the first time, I started to consciously formulate the fact that being an artist was a major calling rather than a game and I was

developing a style of my own, juxtaposing a strong symbolism with diverse references to Precolombian, Islamic, Oriental and Primitive Art as a result of my numerous travels and my attraction to multi-culturalism. It was then that I discovered the Japanese artist Tadanori Yokoo whose work was a powerful and disturbing revelation and with whom I strongly identified.

At that time, my mother, stepfather and half-sister had moved to Australia and settled on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland and after they had been living there for a year, I decided that it would be time for me to go and visit them and find out a bit more about the largest continent island in the world where they had made their home.

They had left Europe in search of sunny skies leaving behind a depressed economy and the threat of nuclear disaster, wide spread pollution and overpopulation. Maybe Australia could offer a brighter future and the promise of a better lifestyle.

Soon after my arrival in 1982, I had to face the disturbing fact that



I had run out of money and my life from then on would be radically different, a situation for which I was the least prepared since I had never had a job and had no skills whatsoever besides creative fantasies. Besides I unfortunately had no concept whatsoever of the value of money, a fact which had made me loose total contact with reality. So there I was, someone who had had so much and all of a sudden had so little. Amusing, is it not?

So I decided not to go back to New York, not being able to afford any longer the Manhattan lifestyle and instead stayed in Australia, applied for residency and settled on the Sunshine Coast where life was cheap and the weather always sunny.

At the age of twenty-five, I had to come to terms with the fact that playtime was definitely over and that if I did not seriously commit myself to a meaningful direction in life, my existence would fade away in banal mediocrity.

Since I could see no commercial future for my graphic work and

because I always had a passion for art glass and admired the works of giants such as Galle, Lalique and Tiffany, and particularly the latter stained glass windows, it occurred to me that stained glass, because of its domestic and architectural function, could provide me with an easier way to make a living as well as fulfil my graphic abilities. This assumption was proved wrong since it involved very costly materials and time consuming work. Nevertheless, a friend who worked in a stained glass studio taught me the basics of his craft and I went on improving my skills and in a short time I was commissioned to design various projects which encouraged me to start my own studio. I also realised that if I was to be successful, I would have to push myself and promote my work and then made the decision that the best way to achieve that would be to exhibit my work to a wider audience.

At the same time, I was to meet Barbara McIvor, a ceramicist trained in Japan, without whose help and support and resolute conviction that one day my talents would lead to greater achievement, none of my present work would have come to existence. And so, thanks to her encouragement I decided to take to Sydney some examples of my work in

the hope of finding a gallery who would be willing to give me an exhibition. Sydney was new to me and I was fortunate to be introduced to Auguste Blackman, son of the painter Charles Blackman, who befriended me and offered to take me on a tour of Sydney galleries. After a few disappointing rejections, we nevertheless ended up on the doorstep of the Hamilton Glass Gallery, a modest but friendly gallery where I was to meet Jeff Hamilton who, impressed by my work offered to give me a solo exhibition.

And so I went back to Queensland and disciplined myself to work everyday in my studio, concentrating on putting together a body of work which I hoped would make the right impact when shown in Sydney. Those were exciting and critical days, and I knew that if my efforts to produce works of quality were to fail, I would seriously have to reconsider my future as an artist.

Six months later and after a lot of hard work and exciting preparations, I had achieved a large number of autonomous etched glass panels, sculptural flat glass pieces and a series of limited edition

photo-montage prints. Satisfied with the work which would represent me, I load my van and drove my precious cargo to Sydney, my head filled with dreams of hope and life then was a feverish adventure. The exhibition provoked enthusiastic responses and support and sufficient sales covered expenses. But what would be more beneficial was my introduction to the Sydney glass community, opening for me a network of contacts and future opportunities.

I first became interested in blown glass because I wanted to include hand blown rondelles in my stained glass design to give it a more three dimensional feeling. So, while preparing for my Sydney show I approached Peter Goss, a local glass blower originally trained at the Jam Factory in Adelaide and commissioned him to blow some rondelles. I had never seen a glass blower at work and while supervising the execution of the pieces I became instantly fascinated by the processes taking place before my eyes. The hypnosis of glass being blown and formed is magic; and so was born in me what has become a driving passion, learning to blow glass, a challenging quest towards perfection. As far as I could remember, I had never seen glass blowing before. My

fascination for it probably comes in part from discovering the process that time by accident. From that moment I became obsessed with learning all I could about glass.

To this day I have never gotten over the excitement of molten glass. All the forms that have been invented and developed are based on the ability of glass to be blown and manipulated in a very natural manner. We use as few tools as possible and most of them are like the original tools invented two thousand years ago. The process is so wonderfully simple, yet so mystifying and intensely skillful. I have watched hundreds of forms blown and I am still amazed to see the first breath of air enter the hot gather of glass on the end of the blowpipe.

The piece is always moving while it is in progress and one has to make decisions very quickly relying on spontaneous combinations of fire, molten glass, air, centrifugal force and gravity.

Glass blowing was invented about two thousand years ago. Historically, glass was always melted and blown in a factory situation.



The Venetians began refining the art of glass blowing on the island of Murano around the year 1000 AD. By the fifteenth or sixteenth century, glass blowers working in the factories around Murano were confined to the island, not only for reasons of safety but also to keep the secrets of their art. This atmosphere of secrecy restricted the flow of information about glass making. This is one of the reasons why the working of glass was nearly unknown outside of factories until Harvey Littleton developed a small scale studio furnace suited to individuals and started the first university course in America in 1962. Prior to that, artists never really had opportunities to work with molten glass because the equipment was too complicated. This is not to say that artists like Tiffany, Daum, Lalique or Galle did not produce some wonderful masterpiece, but they did not know how to blow glass and had the restrictions to work with limited-production factories.

So all of a sudden, you have hundreds of young glass artists in universities and art schools exposed to a previously unavailable process. Before, almost everyone had to be concerned with the economics of the factory: what the public wanted and whether the pieces could be

produced in quantity. Now students could experiment with and discover new techniques. Hundreds of new forms emerged, and only now can we look back over the past twenty five years of glass making to evaluate what happened and assess the excitement and impact of what is now call the Contemporary Studio Glass Movement.

And because I too wanted to be part of that excitement, I decided to seek the best training which would provide me with the skills to become prominent amongst my peers. So I applied to study under the expertise of Klaus Moje, who had just come to Australia to establish the Glass Workshop at the Canberra School of Art. Because of the equipment, facilities, its emphasis on high professional standards and Klaus Moje's commitment to express Australian glass internationally, it is the best place to learn and experiment in glass making in Australia.

Looking back over the four years spent studying in Canberra I realise that it is only the beginning of a lifetime learning process to achieve perfection, experiment and seek innovation and progressive creativity. And so the work that I present to the viewer and critic should

reflect those qualities. it is the the direct reflection of the aesthetic, visual and emotional experiences to which I have been exposed, a product of information and ideas stored away and finally realised..

With a little twist of fate.

Canberra,

1 December 1989